

**Moroccan American  
Center for Policy**

November 29, 2011

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The Honorable Patrick Meehan  
7<sup>th</sup> Congressional District-Pennsylvania  
Chairman, House Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence  
513 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jackie Speier  
12<sup>th</sup> Congressional District-California  
Ranking Member, House Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence  
211 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Chairman Meehan and Ranking Member Speier:

The Moroccan American Center for Policy respectfully submits this letter for the record regarding the forthcoming hearing, "Boko Haram - Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland" to be held by the House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence.

Thank you for convening this important hearing on Boko Haram. The hearing today is correctly focused not just on the danger of Boko Haram but also on the dangerous alliance between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The distinguished panelists will certainly provide expert testimony on the cooperation between these two murderous organizations. The Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP) has devoted considerable time and resources to studying and documenting the connections between terrorist organizations in the Sahel and region. MACP is particularly concerned about the growing ties between AQIM and the refugee camps administered by the Polisario Front near Tindouf, Algeria. The Polisario Front, which is contesting Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara region, seeks to achieve its aims by provoking instability in Morocco and profiting from an extensive network of illegal trafficking in the Sahara and the Sahel—ungoverned spaces that are home to many militant groups. Refugees have been warehoused in their camps for over 35 years. These camps need to be opened to international scrutiny and the inhabitants must be accorded their international rights to chose repatriation to Morocco or elsewhere. There is no reason why tens of thousands of refugees should be illegally forced to live without jobs, dependents on foreign assistance. These camps have become an obvious recruiting ground for AQIM and their allies like Boko Haram and must be emptied immediately.

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The latest example of cooperation between AQIM and elements in the Polisario run camps occurred in late October. On October 23, ten operatives of AQIM entered the headquarters camp of the Polisario in Rabouni in southern Algeria and kidnapped three foreign aid workers, two Spanish nationals and an Italian. Subsequent press reports attributed to an AQIM intermediary made clear that they had carried out this operation with the assistance of Polisario agents inside the tightly guarded headquarters camp. These Polisario collaborators provided AQIM with weapons, transportation, and helped them locate the aid workers inside the camp and subsequently smuggle their hostages through Polisario and Algerian security after the abduction. A week later, according to reliable press reports, Algerian security services confirmed the complicity of some Polisario members in the abductions when they conducted an unannounced raid on the Polisario headquarters and took an undisclosed number of Polisario agents into custody.

The events at Rabouni marked the first time that incontrovertible and concrete evidence has emerged to confirm AQIM's recruitment of Polisario operatives to carry out what has become a trademark practice of the kidnapping for ransom of foreign aid workers, tourists, and employees of foreign firms operating in the Sahara/Sahel region. AQIM is currently holding at least a dozen such hostages that have been abducted over the last two years. The latest of two such events occurred in Mali during the last week of November of this year and resulted in four additional hostages for AQIM and the death of one foreign worker who resisted abduction. Several European hostages have also been executed by AQIM during failed rescue attempts or when foreign governments have refused to meet ransom demands. AQIM has also been responsible for the execution of French nationals in Mauritania as well as full scale military assaults on military outposts of the Mauritanian government in addition to terrorist attacks on the UN offices in Algiers and the bombing of a popular tourist café in Marrakech.

While the Rabouni abductions mark a further escalation in the cooperation between some Polisario adherents and AQIM, the relationship between these two organizations with respect to other criminal activity in the region has been well documented in press and the academic literature on terrorist related activities in the region over the last several years. AQIM's involvement in the trafficking of narcotics in cooperation with Latin American drug cartels as well as the smuggling of people, weapons, and other contraband has become a staple of their activity in the region and reports have linked the Polisario with AQIM in these criminal activities as well. Given the Polisario's long standing practice of siphoning off humanitarian aid intended for the refugee camps for sale in the region's black markets as well as smuggling of other commodities such as cigarettes, medicines, medical equipment, and fuel, it is not surprising that the AQIM/Polisario relationship has grown deeper and evidently more dangerous over time.

Academic, think tank, and NGO roundtables and seminars over the last three years have also often called attention to the dangers, including the increasingly evident risk of terrorist recruitment, associated with the continued existence of the long

term situation of thousands of refugees who are virtually sequestered in the Polisario camps in southern Algeria.

It has not been possible to establish a reliable count of how many refugees are actually confined in these camps, nor to establish the identities of those living there, because of the continuing refusal of the Polisario leadership to permit the United Nations to conduct a census and identification program. However, it is clear that at least 50,000 refugees have been living in inhospitable conditions for more than three decades. Unless action is taken soon to either resolve the continuing dispute over the Western Sahara or otherwise address the issue of the refugee situation of those living in the camps, the dangers of further AQIM recruitment in the camps and still deeper criminal and terrorist ties between AQIM and the camp population is certain to grow.

Press reports also indicated that several hundred Polisario fighters were enlisted to support the Qaddafi regime, and the new authorities in Tripoli, as well as other regional leaders, have expressed grave concerns about the vast arsenals of weapons that pro Qaddafi fighters have taken with them as they fled south back into the Sahara/Sahel region following the collapse of Qaddafi's regime. AQIM leaders have bragged in recent press statements about how much weaponry they were able to acquire during the chaotic situation that prevailed throughout the Libyan conflict.

Taken together, these recent developments should be raising red flags, not only in the region and Europe, but also in Washington, as terrorists groups like AQIM and their criminal associates, freshly armed and increasingly well funded, continue their campaigns to destabilize the region's governments and establish new bases of operation against regional and Western targets.

These latest AQIM/Polisario abductions, the active participation of pro Qaddafi Polisario fighters in Libya, and the continuing cooperation between AQIM and some Polisario agents in continuing criminal enterprises in the region all point to a compelling need to address the continued existence of the Polisario refugee camps in Algeria as a means of denying AQIM and their allies like Boko Haram further opportunities to exploit the hopelessness of thousands of young men who remain confined in these camps with little prospect of a better future.

The best possible outcome in these circumstances would be a resolution to the Western Sahara problem based on a political compromise that has been advanced by Morocco and supported by the last three American administrations as well as a bipartisan majority of both houses of the US Congress. This solution would grant the region a substantial autonomy under continued Moroccan sovereignty and allow for the return of all those who are currently being kept in the camps in Algeria. Unfortunately, while Morocco has demonstrated its willingness to reach such a compromise, the Polisario, with Algerian support, refuses to engage in meaningful negotiations to further define the nature of the autonomy being offered to the

region under a Moroccan initiative that was tabled with the Security Council in April 2007.

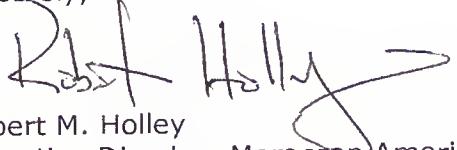
Given this impasse and the evident lack of political will in the international community to encourage the Polisario to move forward with a negotiated political solution, there are actions that should be taken to address the increasingly evident dangers that these refugee camps pose to the security and stability of a region already under substantial stress from the social and political upheavals across North Africa.

The easiest and most practical answer is to eliminate the refugee camps and cease the warehousing of refugees. This solution would be in keeping with international law, eliminate the growing security danger, and alleviate a humanitarian crisis. Under international law, in the normal course of events, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has a mandate to seek resolution of such refugee situations through what are referred to in the Convention on Refugees as "durable solutions." Those solutions are further defined in the law as one of three options: a return to the country of origin when conditions permit; settlement in the receiving refugee country; or resettlement in a third country willing to grant status to the refugees. In the case of the Sahrawi refugees in the Polisario controlled camps in southern Algeria, UNHCR has thus far failed to seek any such active solution to this prolonged humanitarian disaster and has, instead, essentially acquiesced in the semi-permanent warehousing of tens of thousands of refugees in inhospitable camps in the Sahara desert where they are forcibly isolated from any meaningful participation in a modern life or access to any real prospect for a better life beyond continued confinement in the desert.

At least one, if not all, of the three options for a "durable solution" to the problem and the growing danger presented by these camps are currently available. The 7,000 Sahrawis who have already fled the camps to return to Morocco have been welcomed by the Moroccan Government and provided assistance in rejoining their families and restarting their lives. There have been no documented cases, and indeed no allegations of any kind, that in over twenty years, any of these refugees having suffered any negative consequences as a result of returning to Morocco. This provides clear evidence that "conditions permit" as stipulated in the International Refugee Convention. As it continues its meditative efforts on Western Sahara, this is an option that the Security Council should explore in cooperation with UNHCR which has a legal mandate, and indeed an obligation, to seek to assist any refugee from the camps in Algeria who might wish to return to their families in Morocco and elsewhere. Interviews in Morocco with hundreds of such recently returned refugees over the last two years clearly indicate that thousands would exercise this option if they were free to do so without intimidation and threat of punishment by the Polisario authorities. This would represent a significant and meaningful step forward in beginning to address the growing danger to the regions security and stability presented by these camps.

This "free-the-refugees" approach to eliminating the growing security dangers posed by the camps need have no effect on the parallel UN political effort to resolve the larger issue of how best to bring the Western Sahara problem to a solution. That effort will certainly continue, and hopefully with better results than has been the case since 2007. However, to continue to postpone a solution to the regional security dangers of the camp situation until a solution is reached on the larger political issue of Western Sahara, is to invite AQIM to redouble its efforts to exploit the hopelessness of the young men there to their own cause – the results of which are becoming too readily apparent in the region each day. The United States and its regional and European allies should resolve to address this issue without further delay and before the circumstances become even more volatile in the refugee camps than they are already in a turbulent region.

Sincerely,



Robert M. Holley  
Executive Director, Moroccan American Center for Policy



Jordan C. Paul  
Director of Government Affairs, Moroccan American Center for Policy

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**Wednesday, November 30, 2011**

## **Experts at Congressional Hearing Warn of Threat to US from Nigeria-Based Boko Haram, Link to AQIM**

**Cite danger of expanding terrorist ties across Africa's Sahel, flooded by Libyan arms**

**Washington, DC** (Nov. 30)—At a hearing today of the House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, experts warned that the Nigeria-based militant group, Boko Haram, is posing an emerging threat to US interests and the US homeland. The panel also heard compelling evidence that Boko Haram has established links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which is expanding a broad network of terrorist ties to militant groups across Africa's Sahel, including Somalia-based al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and members of the separatist Polisario Front based in Algeria.

"The US intelligence community has underestimated the threat potential of terrorist organizations in the recent past," said a bipartisan report released at the hearing: [Boko Haram - Emerging Threat to the US Homeland](#). "Boko Haram's attacks are occurring at their greatest frequency since the sect emerged from hiding in 2010." The report warns, "AQIM is making a focused attempt to extend its area of operations and sphere of influence into the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa." An alliance between Boko Haram, AQIM, and other militant groups, the report concludes, could "prove costly for the stability of Africa, the Sahel, and American interests."

The hearing was convened by Representative Patrick Meehan (R-PA) and Representative Jackie Speier (D-CA), respectively the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, who also authored the bipartisan report.

The report cites a recent warning by US General/AFRICOM head Carter Ham that a potential alliance of AQIM with Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and other militant groups in the region "would be a very, very dangerous outcome" for the US. Recent news of [Libyan arms](#) smuggled to the Sahel and evidence of AQIM "outsourcing" abductions and other terrorist acts to [Polisario members](#) in Algeria add urgency to the threat.

Testifying at the panel, Peter Pham, Director, Ansari Africa Center, Atlantic Council, said "the fact that Boko Haram in recent months has been able to simultaneously expand its operations beyond its base in northern Nigeria and dramatically upgrade its tactical capabilities ought to be a wake-up call to both the Nigerian government and the international community." Of reported Boko Haram-AQIM links, Pham said "AQIM has a history of contracting out kidnappings to mercenary groups and disaffected groups in the region, including Polisario fighters." He cited Boko Haram, AQIM, al-Shabaab, and the Polisario as the most problematic militant groups in the region.

Lauren Ploch, Specialist in African Affairs, at the Congressional Research Service told the panel that "Boko Haram or AQIM may try to acquire weapons systems from former Libyan stockpiles, including surface-to-air missiles, which some reports indicate may be flowing south through Niger" and into Nigeria. She noted that Nigeria is one of only a few West African countries with direct flights by US airlines to and from the US.

In a letter submitted to the Committee for the hearing, Robert Holley, Executive Director, Moroccan American Center for Policy, cited serious concerns "about the growing ties between AQIM and the refugee camps administered by the Polisario Front near Tindouf, Algeria," which "have become an obvious recruiting ground for AQIM and their allies like Boko Haram." He noted that AQIM's recent kidnapping of Western aid workers from the Polisario-run camps, reportedly with Polisario insider help, mirrors AQIM's hiring of Polisario veterans to kidnap Spanish nationals in 2009, which is documented by Mauritania court records.

**\*\* To view a video playback of the hearing, go to:**

<http://homeland.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-boko-haram-emerging-threat-us-homeland>

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**The Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP)** is a non-profit organization whose principal mission is to inform opinion makers, government officials, and interested publics in the United States about political and social developments in Morocco and the role being played by the Kingdom of Morocco in broader strategic developments in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. For more, please visit [www.moroccoonthemove.com](http://www.moroccoonthemove.com).

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